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The Contents of a Book

Kristen J. Hill

Iowa State University, kjhill@iastate.edu

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Kristen Hill

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The Contents of a Book

Freshman year of college is described as an eye opening experience. Quite often, this journey is a positive one where friends are made, knowledge is gained, and new adventures are explored (especially at Iowa State University where students can “enjoy their adventure”). Well, the ISU commercial holds true. While attending Iowa State University, I have met some amazing people that have influenced me in a positive way and brought a smile to my face. The classes have challenged me and solidified my interest in the sciences. The variety of clubs and events offered at this college has allowed me to meet new people and learn new things from ballroom to fencing. I could write about my first year of college from the perspective of the happy freshman that made great friends and discovered new things, but I have chosen to take a different view on my journey as an ISU student. Almost every college student knows about the highs of their first year but not every student knows what it’s like to live that experience through the eyes of an Asian American. This is the story I will tell, a story that combines comedy and tragedy into one epic tale.

My story begins in Seoul, South Korea where I was born to a young mother in her early twenties. Given that she was so young and having a child out of wedlock can be seen as disgraceful in Korea, I was given up for adoption through Holt International. I met my family on July 31st and so began my new life in Ames, Iowa. Although I grew up in Ames, I attended a small school in the city of Gilbert. There, I was part of the Asian community of the student body, a community whose members could be counted on one hand. Due to the small amount of diversity at my high school, the minority students were often on the receiving end of racial jokes.

I had grown up knowing people would make fun of me and treat me differently because of the way I look on the outside. I told myself that if I could shrug off the insults and survive high school then I could enjoy my life as a college student where I would be free from racism. When one has something to look forward to, it is easier to motivate yourself. I saw this freedom from racism as the grand prize I would receive for completing high school and living through the daily jokes. This fantasy that kept me going quickly changed as soon as I stepped through the beige doors of Oak residence hall.

Like most freshmen, I had never met my roommate before. Being typical teenagers, we became friends on Facebook and did some snooping around on each other's pages. She of course noticed my very American name and my very Asian appearance. During the first night in our small dorm room, I remember her telling me two things. One, she asked me if it was okay if she made Asian jokes. Two, she told me that her friend saw my name and appearance and immediately labeled me with the term "slut". I never knew this, but Asian American girls are commonly categorized using this derogatory term. Her words shocked me and I felt myself falling back into my high school identity as I quickly told her racial jokes would be fine. Convinced that this small incident would not ruin my "grand prize", I continued my journey as a freshman with determination.

Weeks later, I met up with my friends from high school (many students from my high school attend ISU) to share some stories of our first few weeks. Everyone talked about the people they had met and how friendly everyone was. I was shocked to hear that people had actually come up to them and initiated conversations. Thinking back on interactions with students in my classes, I realized that I started every conversation I had. This baffled me and I spent that night wondering why I hadn't had a similar experience to my friends. I came to the conclusion that my outer appearance discouraged others from starting conversations with me

because it looked as though I might not speak English. A few days later, I was enthralled when a man stopped me on the sidewalk to talk. I then realized that he saw me as an international student. The professor offered me his business card and a chance to attend a seminar where I could learn leadership skills and proper English so I could get a job here in US. It seemed people only spoke to me when looked impossibly confused. They would stop, lean down to my height, and speak very slow English to me so that I might understand. I will never forget the look of pure shock on each one of their faces when I responded in perfect English. Now I will be the first one to say that these encounters made great, humorous stories and truly showed the caring spirit of human kind. Not many people would stop for a potential foreigner who looks a little lost to offer their assistance. Still, I couldn't help but wonder what life would be like if I looked different.

My roommate stayed exactly five nights in our room so I had a lot of time to myself to think, to twiddle my thumbs, and to cry. Most nights, I found myself imagining what my life would be like if I was white, how happy I would be and how much better my life would be. Afraid of appearing weak and pitiful, I did not confide in my family or friends about my feelings of isolation. Part of me felt like they wouldn't understand what it felt like to be labeled just because of the way one looked. I had never felt so alone in my life. Soon, I became thankful for my roommate's absence as I spent most of my time crying. I was tired of starting every conversation I had, being talked to in slow motion, hearing racist comments behind my back and sometimes to my face, being labeled before anyone looked past my appearance, and above all, I was tired of being an Asian American. However, no matter how much I fantasized about my life as a white person, nothing could change my racial identity. It didn't seem fair that I had to deal with the typical freshman hassles as well as the problems my race had caused.

These feelings of inferiority continued throughout my freshman year. There were highs and lows but as the year progressed I could feel myself adopting the mentality I had in high

school. I felt that being an Asian American wasn't something I could change so the best thing I could do was prepare myself for future incidents. Gradually, the bits of racism I experienced didn't bother me as much as they used to. Looking back on things, I'm guessing that the college transition and racism combined is what caused me so much stress. Nevertheless, I tried not to dwell on the past as I worked to complete my next semester of coursework. I interviewed to be an Honors 121 Leader and when I was accepted, I attended several training sessions with the other students selected for the position. During these sessions we learned how to run a class and one day we had a workshop about diversity. The instructor asked us several questions about diversity, which we answered with a partner. One of the questions was "when was a time you experienced racism". I smiled because I had too many stories to count but when it came time for my Caucasian partner to answer, he replied that he had never experienced racism in his entire life. His response was a huge eye opener for me as I had always assumed everyone had at least one run in with racism in his or her life. When I told my parents about the student's answer to the question they found themselves in the same boat. They had never had a racist comment directed toward them. If it's possible to have one's mind blown more than once then I think mine went twice that week.

I stand before you today as a sophomore so yes; I did survive my freshman year. Freshman year of college is described as an eye opening experience and I have to agree. I never knew there was a "slut" stereotype for Asian girls raised in America. I never knew so many people would be caring enough and willing enough to help a potential foreign student but I was also shocked to see how many people felt uncomfortable talking or sitting close to one. I never knew people could be so rude that they would yell offensive slurs and or talk down about Asians in the car while one was present in the back seat. I never thought the racism would get worse when I went to college. In high school, I couldn't go one day without someone making a

comment on my ethnicity. Some people only talked to me for the sole purpose of making fun of me and I thought that attitude would change in college. I have dropped that assumption and I have also dropped my old ideas of discrimination. Everyone tells me not to judge a book by its cover but if you ask me, judgment is involuntary. Our mind sees one thing and will instantly connect it to another. In some ways, this is an amazing feat. If someone were to ask me what I thought of the old saying I would amend it, for judgment often stems from the connections we make. I would say that judging a book by its cover is involuntary and it will happen but take time to read the contents of a book and you may find yourself surprised by the richness it holds.